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chapter one

# NO GREATER LOVE

**My friend Yashar was born** in the Islamic Republic of Iran.<sup>1</sup> But Islam never won his heart. Like many of his fellow countrymen, Yashar experienced the disillusionment that comes from forced religious practices. When Yashar’s family moved to Turkey, he continued to be surrounded by Islam, though his family and most of his friends were not religious. But while he was in Istanbul, a fellow Iranian started talking to him about Jesus. Yashar was not convinced. However, he decided to read John’s gospel to find out more about Jesus and to assure himself that Christianity was just as unconvincing as Islam. “The verse that got me was John 15:13,” Yashar recalls, “when Jesus says to His disciples, ‘Greater love has no one than this: that he lay down his life for his friends.’ I’d been searching for the true definition of love,” Yashar told me. “But

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friends and girlfriends and family hadn't satisfied my longing. I knew that in Jesus I had found the definition and the source of love."

In this chapter, I want to start our exploration of what Christian friendship looks like, how important it can be, and how embedded Christian friendship is not in our natural reserves of love for one another, but in Jesus' supernatural love for us. My hope in these next pages is to excavate the gospel shape of Christian friendship, and to demonstrate how tethered to the death and life of Jesus it must be if we're to feast on its delights. You see, in Christian friendship, we can get a glimpse of Jesus' precious love for us: the love that wooed Yashar from death to everlasting life. But if we are to grasp the gospel message at the heart of Christian friendship, we need to grasp the insufficiency of every friendship we will ever have before we meet with Jesus face-to-face.

## RESUME OF FAILURE

In 2010, Caltech postdoc Melanie Stefan published an article in the leading science journal, *Nature*. The article was titled "A CV of Failures." The lede read, "Keeping a visible record of your rejected applications can help others to deal with setbacks."<sup>2</sup> Six years later, Princeton professor Johannes Haushofer made his own "CV of failures" public. It went viral. He dutifully added a line:

This darn CV of Failures has received way more attention than my entire body of academic work.<sup>3</sup>

For most of us, our record of relationships is just as carefully curated as our resume. But if your life has been like mine, you

could easily bang out a resume of friendship failure. The friend you lost. The friend you tried to gain but never got. The friend who ghosted you. The friend you wanted to be close to but who kept you at arm's length. The friend you trusted with your secrets but who shared them out like donuts.

Perhaps, through all this failure, you have learned to manage life without the kind of friends who know your weaknesses and fears. You've learned the hard way that it's safer not to trust. Perhaps, despite some disappointments, you have had enough success at friendship that you've carried on. Or maybe all this talk of friendship love feels alien—like people getting all worked up about a sport you've never played. Perhaps the notion of a tragic friendship loss sounds like we're back in middle school. Those of us who still care deeply about friendship can feel a little sheepish. But the devaluing of friendship love is not how things have always been.

“To the Ancients,” C. S. Lewis observed, “Friendship seemed the happiest and most fully human of all loves; the crown of life and the school of virtue.”<sup>4</sup> In the fourth century BC, the Greek philosopher Aristotle stated bluntly that “without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods.”<sup>5</sup> Aristotle famously put friendship in three categories: friendships of pleasure, of utility, and of virtue.<sup>6</sup> In today's terms, we might see the first as friendships built around shared interests; the second as networking; and the third as friendships we invest in in a deeper sense—ones in which each person seeks the other's good and recognizes the goodness in the other as they seek to grow in goodness side by side. Many in our society today have friends of pleasure or utility; fewer have friends of virtue. These relationships take much more serious investment.

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Noticing the gap between what ancient authors wrote and how his British contemporaries thought, Lewis described a common perception of friendship as “something quite marginal; not a main course in life’s banquet; a diversion; something that fills up the chinks of one’s time.” How has this devaluation of the currency of friendship come about? “The first and most obvious answer,” Lewis suggests, “is that few value [friendship] because few experience it.”<sup>7</sup> So, what might friendship look like at its best?

Interned in a Nazi prison the year before his execution, German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a poem titled “The Friend.” Inspired by his best friend, Bonhoeffer describes the unique nature of friendship compared to other loves like this:

not from the heavy soil of earth  
but from the heart’s free choosing  
and from the spirit’s free longing  
needing no oath or legal sanction  
is the friend given to the friend

As we’ll see in chapter 7, there’s something about freedom that gives friendship its uniquely vital quality. But friendship isn’t just a place of freedom. It is also a domain of comfort, refreshment, safety, and delight. Bonhoeffer goes on:

Like a clear, fresh wellspring  
where the spirit cleanses itself from the day’s dust,  
where it cools itself after blazing heat  
and steels itself in the hour of fatigue—

Like a fortress, where the spirit returns  
after confusion and danger,  
finding refuge, comfort, and strength,  
such is the friend to the friend.<sup>8</sup>

Bonhoeffer profoundly treasured friendship love. But he was no fresh-faced idealist. As we'll see in chapter 2, Christian friendship grows within the broader scope of Christian fellowship, and of this fellowship, Bonhoeffer wrote, "Just as surely as God desires to lead us to a knowledge of genuine Christian fellowship, so surely must we be overwhelmed by a great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves."<sup>9</sup>

Our resume of failure may seem like compelling evidence we shouldn't try again with friendship love. But if Bonhoeffer is right, it could be our best starting point. And when we look at Jesus' famous words on friendship love, we'll find that they're delivered when He knew He was about to be betrayed, denied, abandoned by His closest friends.

## **A NEW COMMANDMENT**

Judas, one of Jesus' twelve chosen apostles, had just walked out into the night when Jesus turned to His remaining followers and gave them these astounding marching orders:

"A new commandment I give you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34–35)

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Love had been the pounding heart of Jesus' ethical teaching—love of God, love of neighbor, even love of enemies. So, how was this commandment new? The newness of His words is anchored in what Jesus was about to do. On that dark night, He called His followers to plunge themselves deeper into love than they had ever gone, because their love for one another was to be *just like* His love for them. This love was set up as the hallmark of discipleship.

Earlier that evening, Jesus had given them a model of self-sacrificing love. He'd stripped down to a towel around His waist and taken on the slave-associated role of washing His disciples' feet. He'd told them they should do the same for one another (John 13:1–15). His followers were likely still in shock. But this was just the prelude. They were soon to witness quite how far His love would go. When Jesus told His friends that they must love each other just like He loved them, He knew He was mere hours from the cross. He also knew that very night they would let Him down.

Peter was by any measure one of Jesus' closest friends. When Jesus took a subset of disciples with Him, Peter was always one of the three. Peter was, therefore, especially distressed when Jesus said that He was going somewhere His disciples could not yet follow. Peter replied, "Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you" (John 13:37). Jesus responded, "Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times" (v. 38). Jesus was right. That night, with Jesus' call to love still ringing in his ears, Peter denied three times he even knew his Lord.

Peter's claim that he would "lay down [his] life" for Jesus, and Jesus' devastating prophecy to the contrary, are hanging in the air

when Jesus uses the language of life laid down the second time:

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:12–13)

I’ve read these words a hundred times, but I’m only gradually waking up to what they mean. Jesus summons His divine authority to give us this commandment. He is the one who has the right to order us: He made us, and our every breath depends on Him. What’s more, He has the *might* to order us: He is the one who can stop storms by speaking to the wind and sea (Mark 4:41). If even storms obey Him, how much more must we weak creatures bend to Jesus’ commandments? But Jesus in this moment doesn’t summon us to do His bidding on the grounds that He created us, or on the grounds that He could force us to comply. No. He commands His followers (both then and now) on the authority of His hell-breaking love. His rule over His followers is not just “loving rule,” as if it could have taken on a different adjective. It is the rule of love itself: love written in His blood. So, what does Jesus mean when He applies this rule to friendship?

### **WHAT DOES “FRIEND” MEAN?**

In the New Testament, the Greek word most frequently translated “friend” is *philos*. Jesus’ words account for eighteen of its twenty-nine instances. He uses the term most often in His teachings (e.g., Luke 15:9). But Jesus also uses *philos* to describe His own relationships: calling His disciples “my friends” (Luke 12:4; John 15:14) and

quoting critics calling Him “a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Luke 7:34). In the Gospels, *philos* usually describes connection between peers: for instance, when King Herod and the Roman governor Pilate become friends in the process of condemning Jesus (Luke 23:12).<sup>10</sup> But against our modern expectations, *philos* could also be used to describe hierarchical relationships: for instance, when those trying to get Jesus crucified tell Pilate he’s no friend of Caesar’s if he doesn’t find Jesus guilty (John 19:12). In fact, as Daniel Eng has pointed out, *philos* was frequently used to describe the client in Greco-Roman patron-client relationships, which were intrinsically unequal: “The oldest and most persistent patron-client relationships existed between a former master and his freedman. . . .” Eng explains. “By granting freedom, the former master became a patron and could expect to receive honor and pledged loyalty from his clients.”<sup>11</sup>

This context helps illuminate the next words out of Jesus’ mouth after He says that there’s no greater love than laying down one’s life for one’s friends:

“You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.”  
(John 15:14–15)

In Jesus’ sacrificial love, we see a radical reversal. The one who is our rightful master lays His life down for those who by all rights should be His servants. Jesus is the master, patron, teacher—and yet He came “not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as

a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). But this revolutionary flipping of the patron-client bond is not all that Jesus has in mind. John’s gospel also gives us evidence that Jesus shared in friendship with His followers in another, more familiar sense.


In John 11, Mary and Martha of Bethany call for Jesus because their brother, Lazarus, is sick. Jesus waits until Lazarus is dead before He sets off. Then He says to His disciples, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him” (John 11:11). Jesus doesn’t say “my friend,” but “our friend.” This indicates that Jesus did not only use *philos* in the patron-client sense when He applied it to His own relationships. While Lazarus could be His *philos* in that sense, he wouldn’t have that patron-client bond with Jesus’ other followers. It also suggests that *philos* was a term used by His followers to capture their relationships with one another. Lazarus’ friendship with Jesus’ itinerant disciples evidently ran deep. Thomas responds to the news of Lazarus’ death by saying to the others, “Let us also go, that we may die with him” (John 11:16). So, how does all this context help us understand what Jesus’ words on friendship love might mean for us?

## **HOW DOES JESUS’ COMMANDMENT IMPACT FRIENDSHIP?**

Jesus’ disciples did not choose to follow Him because they thought they’d fit in with His other friends. Rather, Jesus chose them. Their life together was contingent on relationship with Him, not first and foremost with each other. There’s zero chance that Matthew the tax collector and Simon the Zealot would have selected one

another on a friend connection app, or that Mary Magdalene, from whom Jesus had cast out seven demons, and Joanna the wife of Chuza, who had left King Herod's court to travel around with Jesus, would have been close friends in any other context (Luke 8:1-3). When Jesus calls His followers to love each other just like He loves them, He's not just going with the grain of natural friendship. He is calling people who might never have gone near each other into sacrificial-love relationships. Likewise, we should be ready to form Christian friendships with those utterly unlike us. And while sacrificial love is most associated in our minds with marriage and parenting, we need to recognize that Jesus issued His command to one-another love in the first instance to people who were one another's friends.

Jesus' linking of deep friendship love to His own sacrifice for us means friendship is a vehicle of the gospel, not just because



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in friendship we speak gospel truth to one another (though we should), nor even just because we seek to speak the truth of the gospel to friends who don't yet follow Jesus (though we must). Friendship is a vehicle for the gospel in the sense that its cross-shaped: formed for life laid down in love for others, just as Jesus laid down His own life for us. While

Christian friendship can encompass more occasional connections, and the regular encouragement of seeing friends we mostly only see

at church, it must not be confined to such relationships. We must be ready for the blood and sweat and tears that come with every heart-arresting love. But friendship, as we'll see, is not designed to replicate the other kinds of human bond, but to complement them.

According to the Scriptures, the love we can experience in marriage, parent-child relationships, and friendship each shine lights on different aspects of God's love. The best love we could ever find in Christian marriage mimics how Christ loves His church (Eph. 5:25). The most devoted parent-child love gives us a glimpse of how the Father loves the Son—a love that Jesus tells us is extended to His followers (John 15:9). Likewise, the sweetest, sacrificial friendship love resembles how our Savior loves all those who put their trust in Him (John 15:12–13).

In modern Western culture, we are primed to think of friendship as a nice-to-have, while sexual and romantic love and parent-child love are vital to our thriving. But Jesus flips this script. Instead of telling His disciples that they must get married and have children, Jesus tells His followers that they must love each other, even to the point of death. When Jesus said there was no greater love than laying down one's life for one's friends, He wasn't being hyperbolic or naïve. Instead, He was inscribing the good news of His unfathomable love for us onto Christian friendship with indelible ink.

Before He left the table, Jesus rammed the point home one last time: “These things I command you, so that you will love one another” (John 15:17). Jesus' disciples were sent out with the message of His great, self-sacrificing love for sinners. They were to shout it from the rooftops. But they were also to embody it in how they loved each other. If we are followers of Jesus, one way we will

demonstrate our love for Him is by our love for one another. But Jesus never said this would be easy.

### WEAKNESS, DENIAL, AND BETRAYAL

After dinner, Jesus led His disciples to the garden of Gethsemane, where He told most of them to sit and wait. But then, despite what He had just predicted about Peter's failure, He picked Peter, James, and John to watch with Him, while He went further on to pray. These three had been with Jesus when He raised a twelve-year-old girl from the dead, and when He was revealed in His glory on a mountaintop. They were apparently His inner ring. And yet, when Jesus came back from pleading with His Father for the cup to pass from Him, He found them fast asleep. Hours earlier, Peter had claimed that he would die with Jesus. Now Jesus asks him, "Could you not watch with me one hour?" (Matt. 26:40). This cycle happened two more times. These were friends for whom Jesus was about to lay down His life. Yet they couldn't even stay awake one hour with Him. "The spirit indeed is willing," Jesus observed, "but the flesh is weak" (v. 41). Then, Judas came.

Judas had given those commissioned to arrest Jesus a sign: "The one I kiss is the man; seize him" (Matt. 26:48). So, he came to Jesus saying, "Greetings, Rabbi," and he kissed him (v. 49). Jesus answered, "Friend, do what you came to do" (v. 50). Strikingly, the word that Jesus uses is not *philos* but *hetairos*, which communicates a less intimate form of friendship: more like a comrade or companion.<sup>12</sup> Judas had spent a lot of time with Jesus. But he hadn't given Him his heart. This is a picture of false friendship.

Even before he sold Jesus out, Judas had been stealing from the common money bag (John 12:6).

Of course, Jesus' relationships with His disciples can't be neatly mapped onto our friendships. But just as He commanded His first followers to love one another like He loved them, so He commands His followers today to emulate that love. It's a love prepared to die for one's friends, despite their failure. It's a love that lives vulnerably even toward those false friends who may be finally exposed as only wanting to be with us for what they can get. It's a love that does not easily give up on friends who let us down, because the greatest friend of sinners has not given up on us.

Just as Jesus had predicted, Peter denied he knew his Lord three times. When Peter realized what he'd done, he wept bitterly (Matt. 26:75). Doubtless Peter thought this was the end for his relationship with Jesus. But Jesus had another plan. In one of their post-resurrection meetings, Jesus asked Peter a painful question: "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" (John 21:15). Peter had thought that he was better than his comrades. When Jesus had predicted that each one of His disciples would fall away, Peter had replied, "Even though they all fall away, I will not" (Mark 14:29).

Now, Peter simply responded to Jesus' question, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Instead of pointing back to Peter's

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failure, Jesus pointed forward to his role: “Feed my lambs” (John 21:15). Then Jesus asked a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter replied, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” And Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” (v. 16). As if to match the number of times Peter had denied him, Jesus asked a third time: “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was grieved because Jesus said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” But this time, instead of thinking he knew better than his Lord, Peter recognized that Jesus knew him better than he knew himself: “Lord, you know everything,” Peter replied, “you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep” (v. 17).

In this remarkable exchange, we see the power of forgiveness. Jesus knew that Peter was a sinner from the first, and when we risk deep friendship with each other, we will find ourselves confronted with each other’s sin. But Jesus’ words of friendship love were spoken in full knowledge of Peter’s denial, and the cowardice of the other disciples, who fled when Jesus was arrested. We could imagine Jesus wiping the slate clean and picking up another twelve apostles after He had risen from the dead. But while Judas permanently breaks the bond, we find that Jesus sticks with all the others who had left him. Jesus’ confidence in resurrection life enabled Him to lay His own life down for His most undeserving friends. If we are friends of Jesus now, that same resurrection life flows through our veins and calls us to self-sacrificing love for one another. As my friend Yashar discovered, no one has greater love than Jesus. But we can emulate that love as we relate to one another. No. Scrap that. We must.